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## **Accused Soldier Says Drug May Have Affected Behavior**

By John Diedrich, The Gazette

A Fort Carson soldier who was charged with cowardice after having a panic attack in Iraq says his reaction may have been caused by an antimalaria drug he took.

Staff Sgt. Georg-Andreas Pogany said he saw a mangled body in Iraq in late September and then began suffering sleeplessness, vomiting and shaking.

Within days, commanders sent Pogany to Fort Carson to face court-martial. The cowardice allegation was replaced with a charge of willful dereliction of duty. Pogany said he is innocent of both charges.

Pogany and his attorney said he had a normal reaction to a stressful combat situation.

Now, they suggest a drug Pogany took may have played a role. They plan to raise the issue if the case advances.

Pogany said he and other soldiers from Carson's 10th Special Forces Group took Lariam, also known as Mefloquine, in September before leaving for Iraq.

Pogany, an interrogator but not a Green Beret, said he had not taken the drug before.

"If Mefloquine exacerbated the effects of what would be normal combat stress reaction, that certainly would be a defense to willful dereliction of duty," said Pogany's attorney, Rich Travis.

The prosecutor at Fort Carson declined to comment, citing Pogany's privacy rights.

The military developed Lariam and routinely gives it to thousands of troops serving where malaria is present.

From Oct. 1, 2002, to Sept. 30, the military issued about 45,000 prescriptions for the pills, according to the Department of Defense Pharmacoeconomic Center.

The Army said all anti-malaria drugs it uses are safe.

"The benefits of preventing malaria far outweigh the risks of use," a statement said.

Lariam, available in the United States since 1989 and in other countries since 1985, also has been used by Peace Corps workers, tourists and business travelers.

More than 25 million people have taken the drug, according to Roche Pharmaceuticals, Lariam's manufacturer.

A Roche statement said Lariam has been tested and is safe, adding no medication is free of side effects.

On the warning that comes with Lariam, Roche says in rare instances the drug can cause paranoid and psychotic reactions, anxiety and other neuropsychiatric side effects. A Roche spokesman didn't give a rate for people who experience side effects.

Citing privacy constraints, the military refused to say how many service members have reported problems from Larium.

Larium Action USA, an “information and support network” for people who have had problems with Larium, says as many as one in three people suffer side effects.

“It is not an innocuous drug. People thought it was and it’s hard to change people’s minds,” said Sue Rose, co-director of Larium Action USA.

Pogany, 32, who has been in the Army for five years, said he first took Larium on Sept. 15.

A medic, not a doctor, handed out boxes of Larium, Pogany said. A list of possible side effects was included in the box, but Pogany said he didn’t read it. Regardless, Pogany said he would have taken the drug because refusing to do so would be refusing an order.

Pogany said he took the drug four times including Sept. 29, when he saw the body of an Iraqi man killed by U.S. forces.

Pogany said he soon went to a superior soldier and told him he thought he was headed for a nervous breakdown.

His unit did not give him the treatment soldiers who experience combat stress are required to get, he said.

He saw an Army psychologist from a different unit who said he was experiencing a normal reaction to combat stress.

The psychologist suggested Pogany get a break from duty and stress training. Pogany said he asked his commanders to let him stay in Iraq and work through his problem.

Instead, he was sent to Colorado Springs, where he was charged with “misbehavior before the enemy,” which carries a maximum penalty of death.

Nov. 6, the day before Pogany’s first court date, the 10th Group commander dismissed the cowardice charge. Pogany’s company commander then leveled the dereliction of duty charge, which carries a maximum of six months in prison and a bad-conduct discharge.

Pogany vows to fight, and expects to raise the issue that Lariam may have played a role in his reaction.

“I am not going to pin my hopes on this,” he said. “It’s not a silver bullet, but it is something to consider.”